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MILITANT RESEARCH HAND-BOOK

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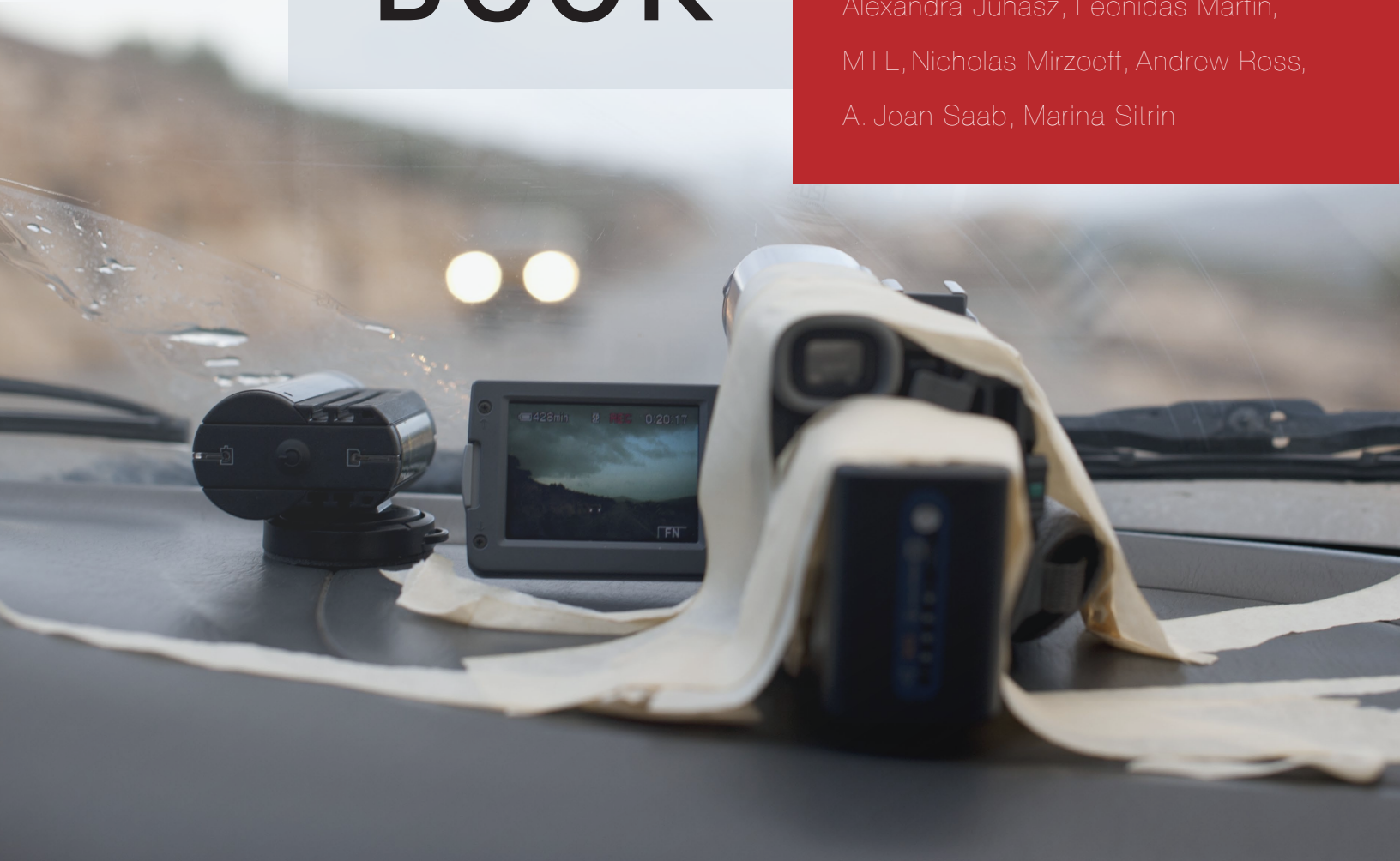

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MILITANT RESEARCH HAND-BOOK

Welcome to The Militant Research Handbook! It's designed to help you answer the question: what is militant research? Let's begin by saying that it's the place where academia and activism meet in the search for new-ways of acting that lead to new ways of thinking. Native American activist Andrea Smith quotes her mentor Judy Vaughn to this effect: "You don't think your way into a different way of acting; you act your way into a different way of thinking."

And that's how the Handbook came about. In 2012, a group of visual culture artists, activists and academics met in New York for an umbrella event called Now! Visual Culture. The packed panel on student debt was perhaps the most passionate moment of the weekend. Some of those present attended one of the first Strike Debt meetings on the Sunday after the event and many of the New York attendees had already been involved with activism in and around Occupy Wall Street. We wanted to develop the relationship further, to think about how academics working on debt could work with debt activists and vice-versa. The result was the idea for the event that became *In Visible Crisis: A Collective Visioning of Militant Research*, held on February 8, 2013.

At the same time, we did not want In Visible Crisis to be solely concerned with New York area issues. We felt the need to engage with other approaches and to think about different perspectives. So we invited participants familiar with militant research in Spain and Argentina. We brought a group of activists and academics from California, where Occupy was less long lived and was not always received positively, especially by those who were concerned about allegations of sexualized violence at the Occupy encampments. Despite a howling snowstorm, we had a two-day three-way engagement that answered some questions and generated many more. In the final assembly of *In Visible Crisis*, it was resolved to produce this Handbook.

So it is not a comprehensive document, as no 32-page booklet could possibly be. It's more of an invitation: what does militant research look like to you? How might you and those you care about engage in such practice? What else do we need to learn in order to begin? This can be a living document, or it might even be the beginnings of a publishing project.

Some may be put off by the name "militant," as Alexandra Juhasz mentions in her contribution. We were using it in two senses. First, "militant research" has been important in Argentina and now Spain since 2001. We took it in the sense of Martin Luther King Jr. "militancy is a term of persistence, and therefore balance, rather than violence." At the event, there were efforts to create a better name but we failed.

I do want to thank those who participated in the event and who are not visibly contributors to the Handbook, although their imprint is very much present, especially Suzanne Collado, Marisa Holmes, Kara Keeling, Yates McKee, A. J. Patrick Liszkiewicz, and Lisa Parks.

Last but in no way least, I owe everything to my outstanding colleagues Dove Helena Pedlosky and Carlisa Robinson, who not only organized the event with panache but designed and formatted this Handbook with great skill and good humor.

SCHOLARLY ACTS OF EVERYDAY MILITANCY

BY A. JOAN SAAB

When I was writing my dissertation, many moons ago, people would often look at me funny when I told them that I was working, in part, on the WPA and the Federal Arts Project. "Really?" some would ask (including a professor of American History who specialized in the 1930s). "But the art was so bad," others would offer.

Despite the fact that the FAP was a decidedly unsexy topic, there was something about the program—in particular in the idea of the artist as a worker, akin "to the farmer or the bricklayer," as WPA Director Harry Hopkins announced—that I found compelling.

I drew serious intellectual pleasure from sitting in the library at MoMA and in the Archives of American Art, going through boxes of primary materials and pouring over documents from the Artists Union and various guilds. I felt a tremendous energy in the mimeographed manifestos, handwritten notes, and drawings and sketches for posters and demonstrations. That energy seemed to come through the pages, conveying the promise, the anger, and the vigor of the moment. Despite the widespread economic hardship and political upheaval of the 1930s, there was a widespread sense of optimism around the idea that through collective practice, organizing, and visibility, artists—and workers—could change the world.

I share these nostalgic reminiscences because for me they encapsulate militant research—in both theory and practice. In the big money, international art world of today, it seems unimaginable that artists would unionize as manual workers or that the United States government would (or could) invest in large-scale cultural infrastructure projects in our post-culture war, red state/blue state climate. And while the WPA projects that resulted from these efforts may have ultimately failed to produce a utopian "democratic art," they did teach millions of citizens that art and artists matter. But, looking back, what this moment also underscores, for me, is the necessity of finding pleasure in our archives and understanding what we do as work. Too often, we are swayed by the dismissive response of "Really?" from our peers and we overlook or—worse—distrust the idea that we can find pleasure in our teaching, scholarship and other forms of labor.

Pleasure is key to optimism, and optimism—the idea that things can actually change—is key to militancy. Like the artists of the 1930s who rallied for an Artists' Union and a living wage in exchange for their creative labor, we need to insist that what we do as scholars matters, and better yet advocate for new forms of collective practice and visibility. Moreover, as generation after generation of students are crushed by student loans and the university infrastructure increasingly exploits adjunct and contingent labor, we need to rethink what constitutes scholarly labor and insist on some sort of change in practice. Rather than cloaking academic debt and exploitation in silence and shame, we need to find ways to make it visible and thus a site of possibility for radical change. But, how can we do this? For me, this involves returning to the archives and revisiting seemingly unsexy moments in history. We need to find pleasure in what we do, and we need to use this energy to model possibilities for change for scholars and students engaged in acts of everyday militancy. ■

WHAT IS MILITANT RESEARCH?

Militant research might be defined as the place where activism and academia meet. There is a wide range of advocacy research in universities that comments on and about activism without expecting the work to be directly engaged with it. Militant research works in and with the movements it is concerned with.

GLOBAL PRECEDENTS AND AGENDAS: A TOP FIVE

i. Colectivo Situaciones

Buenos Aires. Argentina.
colectivosituaciones.blogspot.com/p/colectivo-situaciones.html

In 2005, Colectivo outlined their strategy of "research militancy" situated in tension between the "sad militant" and the "detached, unchangeable university researcher." Their goal:

> *a practice capable of articulating* involvement *and* thought.

In a time when the fantasy of common ground (known to the US administration as bi-partisansip) has disappeared, idealization of all kinds is problematic:

> *We think that the labor of research militancy is linked to the construction of a new perception.*

Hence this publication is dedicated to what *Colectivo* call the *collective visioning* of militant research.

ii. Observatario Metropolitano (OM)

Madrid. Spain.
http://www.observatoriometropolitano.org/

OM describe themselves as:

> *a militant research group that utilizes investigations and counter-mapping to look into the metropolitan processes of precarious workers, migrants, and militants taking place in Madrid, brought on by crisis, gentrification, speculation and displacement.*

In their *Manifesto for Madrid*, OM saw militant research as responding to *the destruction of the elementary bases, which make possible common life* (la vida en común) in a city like Madrid.

They set up specific research projects in groups, publish long and short versions as books/pamphlets and free PDFs online. They concentrate on the new urbanism of Madrid as a global city, social movements and the crisis.

iii. Mosireen

Cairo. Egypt.
http://mosireen.org

In their own words:

> *Mosireen is a non-profit media collective in Downtown Cairo born out of the explosion of citizen media and cultural activism in Egypt during the revolution. Armed with mobile phones and cameras, thousands upon thousands of citizens kept the balance of truth in their country by recording events as they happened in front of them, wrong-footing censorship and empowering the voice of a street-level perspective.*

In January 2012, Mosireen was the most-watched not-for-profit YouTube channel in the world. They have continued to cover the unfolding crisis in Egypt, providing crucial perspectives unavailable in Western media.

iv. Sarai

New Delhi. India.
http://www.sarai.net/

Sarai has created a coalition of researchers and practitioners for the past decade.

> *we have sought to participate in and cultivate a public domain that seeks to find a new language of engagement with the inequities, as also the possibilities, of the contemporary world.*

Some common threads link the different projects from India, Egypt, and Spain despite the very different contexts in which they take place. Each seems to serve as a key source of information regarding what's happening in the giant cities created by financial globalization. Each city has been transformed over the past twenty-five years of neo-liberalism.

Each group privileges making its work available free, producing it rapidly and in as many formats as possible. These tactics strike at the heart of the walled, gated communities that call themselves universities in the Anglophone world, always happy to think of themselves as elitists in the intellectual sense. Can we continue to assume that we can still be egalitarian in other ways while maintaining such hierarchies?

RAQS Media Collective, Revoltage, 2011. Frith Street Gallery (London). Image credit: Camila y el Arte.

v. RAQS Media Collective

New Delhi. India.
http://www.raqsmediacollective.net/

The Raqs Media Collective enjoys playing a plurality of roles, often appearing as artists, occasionally as curators, sometimes as philosophical agent provocateurs. They make contemporary art, have made films, curated exhibitions, edited books, staged events, collaborated with architects, computer programmers, writers and theatre directors and have founded processes that have left deep impacts on contemporary culture in India. Raqs (pron. rux) follows its self declared imperative of 'kinetic contemplation' to produce a trajectory that is restless in terms of the forms and methods that it deploys even as it achieves a consistency of speculative procedures. Raqs is also part of Sarai.

vi. TIDAL: Occupy Theory, Occupy Strategy

New York. US.
Tidalmag.org

TIDAL is the theory/strategy journal that emerged from Occupy Wall Street. The following comes from the mission statement:

"There is no radical action without radical thought. *Tidal* offers a space for the emergence and discussion of movement-generated theory and practice. It is a strategic platform that weaves together the voices of on-the-ground organizers with those of long-standing theorists to explore the radical possibilities sparked by the occupations of Tunis' Kasbah, Tahrir, Sol, Syntagma, Zuccotti and their aftermaths.

Tidal understands that we are engaged in the early stages of an anti-capitalist struggle in the United States and beyond that's finally capable of ushering in a non-capitalist way of living. In *Tidal*, our immediate role is to facilitate movement and action that can transform existing power structures. Our overarching objective lies in locating power and agency with people so that they can determine their own destinies.

In *Tidal*, theory is a means of analysis that can enable us to collectively better understand our situation. Strategy follows. It is the art of devising or employing plans or stratagems towards the goals defined in the course of action. Action means the search for, and creation of, ruptures in the existing order. This struggle. Many voices. History. Collectively: imagine." ■

RESEARCH FOR WHOM?

BY ANDREW ROSS

In the training I undertook for an academic career, I was taught—or taught myself—how to be an armchair analyst of words and images. The goal was to be a textual critic who spun clever readings out of his own brain—or at least that was the idea. As a result, I was taught how to read and not necessarily how to listen to others. In fact, the spoken word was something to be distrusted in the academic milieu in which I was trained—some called it by the derogatory label, "phonocentric." Among other things, the textualists' insistence on the written word was quite out of kilter with the storytelling Celtic culture in which I had been raised.

Over the years, I lost my appetite for armchair analysis, although I still keep my hand in (I like my armchair). I have long since moved out into the ethnographic field, where listening to other people is a more important source of information and data. My own favored research method is what I call scholarly reporting–a hybrid blend of investigative journalism and field ethnography. One thing that hasn't changed however is the standpoint towards communities I study and write about. I've always done what could be called advocacy research, which involves undertaking research that ends up championing some cause or idea, or expounding on behalf of others. Advocacy can be done from the armchair just as much as it can be done from research based on contact with people in the field as a participant-observer. It is very common among scholars who work in the humanities or qualitative social sciences. Some quantitative researchers often use statistical objectivity as cover for their standpoints, primarily so that their outcomes are not perceived to be tainted by personal bias.

Almost all of my academic colleagues do advocacy research of one sort or another. Some of us actually choose to do research for the communities we study—

AT WHAT POINT DOES ADVOCACY PASS OVER INTO THE REALM OF MILITANT RESEARCH?

either marginalized communities without a voice (though one has to be wary of ventriloquizing a voice for them), or ones with no resources to spend on research, or who have limited access to the knowledge they need. This list of "clients" might also include a group of political activists who are too busy to devote time and energy to research, and who need tailor-made analysis to back up their actions or appeals to lawmakers. In each of these cases, the "contract" with the community in question is different, and it can be fraught with pitfalls for those who are trying to maintain ethical standards of research.

At what point does advocacy pass over into the realm of militant research? There are several ways of answering that question, but all of them revolve around shifts in method. In other words, it is not enough to say that militant research is about studying radicals, their actions or their ideas. More often than not, it entails the researchers' active and committed participation in the political movement of their subjects. As opposed, say, to participant-observation, which is a favored method among ethnographers, militant research involves participation by conviction, where researchers play a role in actions and share the goals, strategies, and experience of their comrades because of their own committed beliefs and not simply because this conduct is an expedient way to get their data. The outcomes of the research are shaped in a way that can serve as a useful tool for the activist group, either to reflect on structure and process, or to assess the success of particular tactics. In many cases, especially where there are no media professionals on the ground to document events, the active witnessing of injustices on the part of militant researchers can be invaluable sources of protection and inspiration for comrades whose rights are being abused.

If direct action or violence is involved, then the researchers' embedded role can be dangerous. For Nancy Scheper Hughes, the would-be "barefoot anthropologist" accepts that her body is on the line in a way that does not affect the more detached analyst who can leave the field whenever she likes, regardless of the relationships she may have been built up to further her study. For those, like myself, who have been scholar-activists within Occupy, the omnipresent threat of police repression, even brutality, speaks to this built-in element of danger. Police show scant regard for journalistic credentials when they start swinging their batons, and, of course, none whatsoever for scholars engaged in the field.

The mentality and practice of the "circumstantial activist" may be enough to extract the study data (like the field reporter who "gets her story"), but it does not necessarily produce militant research. For that, collaboration is required, based on longterm trust, mutual commitment, and political engagement. Otherwise, the researcher will not fully understand the emotional or tactical stakes of certain decisions that are made by groups who are fighting oppression and who may be evading repressive tactics directed against them. This form of collaboration can also mitigate the unequal relationships between researchers and their subjects. For example, the method of co-research or conricerca, developed by Italian Marxist operaist thinker Romano Alquati and his allies in the 1960s, rejected the distinction between the research subjects and the researchers, along with the prevailing vanguardist belief that the task of leftist intellectuals was to lead or otherwise assist the "structurally weak" workers to live up to their allotted class roles. The Turin factory workers who were participants in the original conricerca projects were not particularly interested in living up to the Marxist workerist ideal of a "class for itself." If anything, they wanted liberation from the very work that underpinned their status as working class heroes. Co-research, then, was a way of giving voice to their political autonomy as much as it was an inquiry into their working conditions.

"MILITANT RESEARCH INVOLVES PARTICIPATION BY CONVICTION"

So, what about militant research on debt? In the years since the financial crash, when the debt crisis finally migrated from the global South to Europe and North America, a vast debtors' archive has sprung up through a myriad of online sources. The raw experiential material for building a debtors' movement is everywhere, and all of the witnessing about the misery and exploitative underpinning of the debt trap is relatively accessible. An anti-debt movement that conducts its own militant research is another matter, however. Among its tasks is to gauge how the mass expression of sentiment on the part of the indebted can be channeled and shaped into an effective counter force against the organized power of the finance industry.

I was able to take on a small part of that burden through my own involvement, first in the Occupy Student Debt Campaign, from November 2011, and then in Strike Debt, the Occupy offshoot. It was in these circles that we nurtured the affective tool of speaking publicly about personal indebtedness—a coming out ritual that functioned, for the speakers, as a gateway into the activist community, transforming the shame and stigma of the debtor into a badge of militancy—the red square (carrement dans le rouge) that is now a movement symbol. We developed a common pool of knowledge about the conditions of household debt for general use in the public media, blogs, teach-ins, movement publications, and other kinds of circulation. Some of this knowledge was collectively researched—the Debt Resistors Operations Manual, released in September 2012, offered advice to readers about how to escape debt and evict the power of creditors from their lives. Other kinds of debt research were taken on by those with the time and/or the skills to do what I like to call public service analysis.

Much of the latter was aimed at eroding the public myths on which the power of the finance industry rests. Even after five years of post-crash exposes of the fraud and corruption of Wall Street, we are still told that the business of finance is just too complex for the lay public to understand. The mystique of repayment—the idea that debt repayment is a personal test of moral responsibility—still holds sway in the public imagination.

Wall Street has shown all too clearly that this obligation does not apply to them, yet individual debtors are

condemned to go on believing they should be bound by it. Any research we could undertake to erode that conviction was a strike against the debt system because it helped to break down the taboo.

Has my experience in the fledgling debtors movement transformed how I think about doing research? On anything like a lasting basis? No doubt. However, even though I am too secure to worry about whether militant research might stain my academic reputation, I may be more wary about how I introduce these methods to my students. In the graduate program where I teach, students have long been asked to think of themselves as "intellectual activists"—they come into the academy because they cannot do the research they need to do on the outside, but if the results only circulate within the academy, then they are failing to live up to our expectations. Many of them take on the challenge, but others do not. In any event, the research methods they choose are taught as a means to an end, not as a mode of belonging or as a token of righteousness. Come to think of it, that's not a bad way to approach militant research

After all, who needs another dogma? ■

How does debt affect your life?
How does debt affect your research?
How might an analysis of debt lead to a change in your life and work?

"REDISTRIBUTION NOT GROWTH"

"We are wealthy societies but we don't know how wealthy we are because it is not equally distributed. Such distribution would show us how wealthy we really are."

"Since Ronald Reagan, we have used debt as form of upwards wealth transfer."

"Debt affects how my family maintains a home, clothes and feeds our family."

"Debt affects my business as a videographer in that I cannot afford film equipment until it is three or four years older than the 'state of the art' equipment. Thus my competitive edge in equipment becomes a liability."

"As a part-time member of the 9/11 Truth Commission, I felt totally 'poor' and could not join members and keep a regular job and have any extra funds for this important endeavor."

"My student loan debt will last forever, even though I have been responsible. It's like a second mortgage."

"I feel like debt has become a requirement to do research, for the privilege of graduate school and for professional recognition."

"Without a change in the debt system, we see a bleak future."

"I want to make biographies of debt, showing different moments in people's lives when they go into debt."

"I want to make a mythbuster infographic on the ideology of 'good' debt vs. 'bad' debt"

"Debt forces me to focus on 'lucrative' subjects for research.

"Debt's about discipline: you mess up, you die"

"I'm actually really grateful for my debt because it opened my eyes to many social inequalities that I have the courage to confront now."

"Debt is a new form of social control."

"Child rearing is becoming a privilege because of debt."

"The opposite of debt should be the commons but instead it is charity."

"You must have a credit card to get a credit score so you can get an apartment."

"I used to work on Wall Street before the crisis. The culture was psychopathic. Mortgage origination practices were insane. Debt is more of a systemic social collapse than a set of personal problems."

"I can only do research that is funded."

"As adjunct faculty, I am eligible for food stamps. How can a school founded on social justice be like this?"

"My research is on social constructions. I'm interested in 'taxonomies of explanation' such as the invisible parts of the money system like monetary policy. Money could be issued based on the wealth of the commons rather than gold or other arbitrary measures. We have been taught to assume that debt must be the basis of the system."

"Debt is a different issue from country to country. Germany has low national debt but personal debt is high. Spain is affected by mortgage debt and the national debt crisis. And so on."

"These testimonies need to feed back into our analysis so that it's a personal form of politics, not a data-driven economics." ■

From the Debt Workshops at InVisible Crisis

Protest graffiti in Argentina depicting Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo.
Image credits: [left] seven resist (www.disorder-berlin.de); [right] Mike Rivera

MEASURING SUCCESS: AFFECTIVE OR CONTENTIOUS POLITICS?

BY MARINA SITRIN

Too often our standards for evaluating social movements pivot around whether or not they 'succeeded' in realizing their visions rather than on the merits or power of the visions themselves. By such a measure, virtually every radical movement failed because the basic power relations it sought to change remain pretty much intact. And yet it is precisely those alternative visions and dreams that inspire new generations to continue to struggle for change. —Robin Kelley

There have only been two world revolutions. One took place in 1848, the second took place in 1968. Both were historic failures. Both transformed the world. The fact that both were unplanned, and therefore in a profound sense spontaneous, explains both facts—the fact that they failed, and the fact that they transformed the world. —Immanuel Wallerstein

DREAMS, DIGNITY, AND A YARD STICK

Social movements are made up of people. People with ideas and dreams, dreams for themselves, dreams for the collective, and dreams for the movements and the world. On occasion these dreams and goals are comparable with those of social scientists who study social movements, and who claim to know what constitutes a successful movement. Under a certain interpretation this might suggest that they claim to know the hopes and aspirations of the movement participants. James Petras argues for example, that a movement must seize state and institutional power in order to be successful. Unemployed Workers Movement participant Neka says that for her and for the movement dignity and freedom in, and of, their relationships is a huge part of what they desire and dream. Who is right? Is Petras really stating that Neka is not successful because she did not take over the State? Does his argument mean that she cannot know what success is for herself or for her movement? That she cannot know her very own dreams and desires?

This is an important point that is too often overlooked by social movements theorists. Who decides what constitutes success? Success can only be determined by those people in struggle; those who are fighting or organizing for something. Francis Fox Piven and Richard Cloward argue this in the very beginning of *Poor People's Politics*. In fact, they added it to the book's introduction as a result of many peoples' first reaction to the manuscript they distributed. Many readers spent much effort arguing about what the people in the movements "ought" to have wanted.

Success of a movement, movement goals and people's desires come from those people, those social actors, not those studying them or politically desiring to lead them. In fact, it is against this way of thinking and organizing (be it on the left or right) that the movements in Argentina were born. The rupture was with the state, or other forms of authority dictating what they should be doing and how they should be doing it. This includes not only governments and politicians, but also left political parties and scholars. "Que se vayan todos" really means *todos*.

What does it mean for people in the movements in Argentina to have been successful? What do other social scientists argue? Is there any place of overlap? What can we learn from this for future interpretations of movements and is the gap between theory and practice "phantasmagorical" as Boaventura de Sousa Santos argues?

So then, what is a scholar of the movements, who works together with the movements, to do both in terms of methodology and analysis? Many of my friends and *compañeros* in the movements in Argentina think this question is waste of time because they have been harmed by theorists, social scientists and leftist groups theorizing their ways of being, publishing the results of these "studies", so often conducted without their participation. I recall a late night conversation in the home of Neka and Alberto in the poor peripheral (now politically central) neighborhood of Solano. We were sitting in their recently built kitchen, in a home constructed on taken land, as were their neighbors homes, all built collectively. We had just finished a late dinner with many from the community, who were also living in homes collectively constructed from random pieces of wood and cement. We were drinking wine and mate and many people were smoking, as is still a norm in Argentina. It was a nice calm after a filling meal. I decided to use this opportunity, with some people around, to ask their feelings about academics, and specifically people who have been writing that they, the *piqueteros*, and more generally the they of the movements in Argentina, are at best totally unrealistic, and at worst, dead. Neka responded first. She smiled so openly at me, but also a little condescendingly, and said, "So? Marina, don't worry about them. Who cares what they think? We know what we are doing, and we are doing it well." For Neka, Alberto, Claudia, Maba, Claudio, Vladimir and Ramon my question was irrelevant. They continue, day in and day out, creating new lives, new social actors, and more dignity. They are succeeding with or without the opinions of outsiders, whether these scholars confirm what the participants already know, or not. In my opinion however, with the wrong framework, or by researchers asking the wrong questions the movements can be detrimentally e/affected.

To clarify, I am not implying that all academics fail to understand or do not even try to understand. In fact, Susan Buck-Morss gave a talk in late 2011 in which she reflected,

> As the Egyptian Feminist Nawal Sadaawi, responded last spring: Make your own revolution. The ways forward will be as varied as the people of this world. Feminists globally have taught us the need for such variety. All of these ways forward deserve our solidarity and support. We, the 99%, must refuse to become invisible to each other. The experiments that are going on now in thousands of locations need space, the space that Walter Benjamin called a *Spielraum* (space of play) to try out doing things differently. And they need time, the slowing of time, the pulling of the emergency brake, so that something new can emerge. This is time that state power wants to cut short, and space that old-style political parties want to foreclose. There is no rush. The slowing of time is itself the new beginning. Every day that this event continues, it performs the possibility that the world can be otherwise. Against the hegemony of the present world order that passes itself off as natural and necessary, global actors are tearing a hole in knowledge. New forms emerge. They nourish our imagination, the most radical power that we as humans have.

This passage comes from her engagement with the new movements in the United States, which are in turn inspired by those movements around the globe in 2011. Her use of Benjamin's concepts of time and the notion of "now-time" discussed in earlier chapters, (movement participants speak of as not waiting for some future time or future event to change things), are more than comparable.

The talk that Buck-Morss gave was initially going to be titled "A Communist Ethic" and she changed the word Communist to Commonist, so as to reflect the changing politics she sees and is engaged in. This is a fine example and one that other scholars and academics could follow; to be willing to change one's perspective and thus the terms and framing of one's understanding based on the world around us.

The movements in Argentina are a success and they continue to breath, live and succeed. Within the movements new subjects are forming and are doing so with dignity. Often they struggle sometimes just to eat a balanced meal, sometimes a filling meal, but they continue.

This question of success reminds me of a famous poem by Cuban poet Nicolas Guillen, *Tengo* (I have). The poem describes in detail what he, the narrator, now has because of the Cuban Revolution. The poem is not about food, housing or education or any of the material things that were won from the revolution—things that poor blacks in Cuba did not have before the revolution. What he writes is that he now has dignity. He writes of what it feels like to walk down the street. To hold his head high, and know his children will hold their heads high. He writes of how he feels and how he sees himself, and

how others see him. When he does say that now he has education, that he can learn to read and write, he follows those lines with, “and to laugh, and to smile.” That sort of success is not as measurable as the taking over of the state and making education free and food a right. But it is part of the success. In Argentina, the measuring stick, as Neka taught me, is dignity.

It is not just about “winning” a struggle, but about the process, which no matter how or where it takes place, forever transforms people’s ways of seeing themselves and their relationships to others. Paula, an activist in Argentina reflected on the experiences of the assemblies in this way.

> IN ARGENTINA, THE MEASURING STICK, AS NEKA TAUGHT ME, IS DIGNITY.

> The experiences have produced profound transformations in people, in the subjectivity of people, in people feeling themselves as actors for the first time in their lives. In the assemblies people from all different backgrounds, of different ages and social situations have come together to discuss and listen to each other, each persons’ opinion and voice not being valued as more or less than any others, this is extremely important, especially considering how the political parties work, which is the opposite. What is being constructed is a new way to do politics. People are the protagonists, the subjects. If the assemblies disappeared tomorrow, it would not be something so serious because something fundamental has changed in people. People will never again be passive in their lives. (Conversation in Paternal, Buenos Aires, 2003)

This new way of being is imbued in most everything. It is seen in almost all the new political formations that have come about since the rebellion, groups that assume *horizontalidad* and a form of prefigurative politics

> In terms of the process of changes in subjectivity, the interesting thing is that this is a social education. Imagine if the assemblies disappeared, we have had the social training of the assembly. The non-hierarchical structure and self-organization is something that you can use in the future, and in other political experiences. In this sense I’m not a pessimist. I can be more pessimistic in the short-term, in the sense that I would like it if the assemblies were stronger. But in the long run, what I know now is that the crisis in the 90’s brought about lots of social education. We will learn from all these experiences of self-organization and the next time we need an assembly we will have had all the experiences from the assemblies of 19th and 20th.

Claudia below describes why she thinks some academics have a hard time understanding what the movements are doing. She explains this by way of example

> In Chilavert, the neighbors where all there in the intense cold, and they applauded and applauded with such pleasure in seeing what they had accomplished —this is more than the feeling that you are the owner of your experience. It is not a question of property, it is more of a feeling of having given birth. What you see there is that the people are so proud, and their children are walking by themselves (upright), this is *autogestión*. ….I think that this is something that the academy cannot interpret because it is something you have to see with a deep level of sensibility. (Conversation in Buenos Aires, late 2009)

This interview, with both Claudia and Sergio from Lavaca went on for a number of hours, and the question of both academic or intellectual interpretations of the movements came up numerous times. The movements are not unequivocally against attempts to theorise their successes and failures, however they believe that traditional intellectuals have yet to do so accurately. This is in part due to the ‘nature’ of the academy and formal training within education, but it is also very much a consequence of the changing and intuitive nature of the movements, which above all require full and active participation from those interacting with them. As Claudia explains a little later,

> I find that there are those who say, it’s all co-opted, all useless, and then when you get directly involved, it is the opposite, and you say, this is full of life. In other words, between the discourse and practice there is a great divorce. I think it will take many years of thinking to figure out how to conceptualise or theorise about what is happening now, it is quite challenging. … So, the intellectual, logically, what he does is defends his position and holds his ground, because otherwise this process undermines him.

This does not mean that people cannot understand the movements, or help lend analysis and meanings. One such person, referred to a great deal in this book is Raul Zibechi, who has spent a great deal of time in Argentina with the movements. In late 2009 he spoke with Lavaca, and in response to questions of if and how the movements have continued, and how to understand the current situation he replied,

Protest at Plaza de Mayo, Buenos Aires, Argentina.
Image credit: Beatrice Murch

> How to understand what happened on the 19th and 20th [December, 2001]? Was it a slogan that then burst with the slogan, “they all must go”—that was never concretized? A problem only of the savers? Or is it a point of inflection in history, in the political culture of the country, and with crucial scope for all of what has happened in this decade that is now ending, and in so much of what is continuing to occur?

……

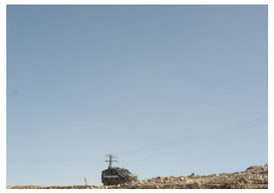
The autonomous movements place much importance on the internal changes of the movement itself, shifting identities, creating new relationships etc. They are not focused on formal power, but rather on the creation of new and alternative powers. This does not mean that they are not engaging with the State (and forms of institutional power), but the State is not the point of reference, the movement is, as is the creation of new values and new relationships. ■

Reprinted from Everyday Revolutions: Horizontalism and Autonomy in Argentina (Zed Books, 2012) with permission of the author.

MTL

Before Beginning

MTL is in the West Bank. We are visiting friends and family, and retracing memories of the first Palestinian uprising. We are traveling, listening, recording, and translating. Land, life, liberation are on our mind. Then Mohamed Bouazizi ends his life through self-immolation. Tunisia breaks.



We return to New York. The city looks and feels different. Things are buzzing; we are watching closely. Soon Egypt breaks. We see revolutionary people-power from below. But it doesn't seem to apply to the United States, even though we know it is all connected in an expanded field of empire. We say to ourselves, "That is a revolution against decades of brutal military dictatorship backed by the United States; those are not the same conditions faced by those living in the heart of the empire itself." But then Greece breaks. Here is a nominal democracy and yet people are rising up, taking to the streets, and holding the squares. Then Spain, a Western nation with an advanced economy in the midst of elections. With the crisis people are compelled to occupy, throwing into question the legitimacy of the entire political process: *basta ya! no nos representan*.

We start to feel something is possible in the United States. The Wisconsin capitol building is occupied, and the occupiers invoke Egypt; labor and community groups set up the Bloombergville camp in New York to protest urban austerity, making reference to the Spanish Indignados. Cracks are forming. The power of the powerless is beginning to show itself.

The Artist as Organizer

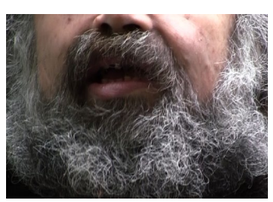
We are meeting regularly. In light of the global economic disaster, we know we have the chance to push things further in the United States. The crisis has produced an opportunity. We are privileged to be in New York. We carry our cameras and our notebooks to document things, but we end up participating. The art we had imagined making for so long is starting to happen in real life. We do not have time to agonize about representation. We are making images, writing texts, having conversations, and developing relationships out of necessity and urgency. Aesthetics, research, organizing—it is all coming together in the creation of a new public space in the heart of the empire. It embodies imagination with implications on the ground. #occupywallst.

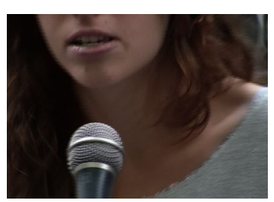
At this time, occupy is a verb rather than a noun. People meet every Sunday at 5 p.m. for hours to plan for the occupation on September 17. First at the Charging Bull sculpture a few blocks from the New York Stock Exchange on August 2. Next at the Irish Hunger Memorial in the Financial District on August 9. Then at the same time every week at Thompson Square Park in the East Village. A horizontal process is used in meetings. Facilitation allows for the maximum number of diverse voices to be heard. No one can speak on behalf of others. Organizations cannot participate as such, only as people speaking on behalf of themselves. The slogan "We are the 99%" is proposed to invite others to join. Everyone is interested in creating space, not deciding an agenda or specifying demands. Folks are in minimal but fundamental agreement on the need to reorganize social, political, and economic life in a manner that is just and equitable.

Liberating Space, Cracking Capitalism

We occupy on September 17. A tweet goes out to gather at Chase Manhattan Plaza in front of the Jean Dubuffet sculpture. It's a few blocks from the stock exchange. We find the plaza barricaded, so we go to plan B: Zuccotti Park is wide open. Our backs are on pizza boxes. Our bodies warm the concrete. You look up, the buildings cease to dominate the horizon as figures against a ground; instead, they frame a threshold of freedom opening onto the sky. Di Suvero's "weird red thing" watches over us. We dumpster dive. *If we have food, people will stay*. The kitchen is born. When the police prohibit amplification devices, we institute the People's Mic: we repeat what people say so others can hear, and in the process we internalize each other's words.

General Assemblies are held daily. Rather than issue demands, we articulate principles of solidarity. We begin the process of mapping capitalism with our bodies. We take direct action to communicate injustice. The park is now everyone's open wound. We realize how much needs to be undone. We address racism, colonialism, patriarchy and other forms of oppression head on. At the epicenter of financial terrorism, we establish a community of care and healing—a people's refuge in the belly of the beast.

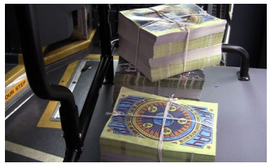


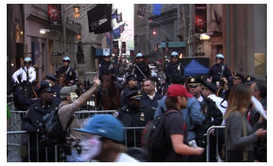


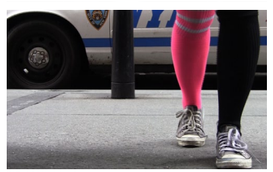
We are sparking imagination. Occupations are spreading. Momentum is building. But they evict us from Zuccotti Park. Attempts to occupy Duarte Square at 6th and Canal do not succeed. We are arrested and brutalized by the NYPD. A police state fears everything that does not follow its script. Our greatest threat is that we speak openly about inequality while establishing a self-organized community, a community grounded in the commons.

May Day Comes & Goes

Winter is hard. The camps are gone. Police repression has taken a toll. We realize we have to work differently to create conversations and actions in the absence of the park. We organize towards a future date and choose May Day—a day of global labor solidarity that has been suppressed in the United States. We come together: labor and student organizers, people from Occupy Wall Street, undocumented workers centers, inspired academics, and insurrectionist friends. We have weekly planning meetings. We debate what constitutes a general strike? Who can make the call? Who can participate? What does strike mean for precarious, undocumented, or non-unionized workers? What are the consequences of a call to strike that goes unheeded?







Finally, people agree on the following language:

> OCCUPY WALL STREET STANDS IN SOLIDARITY WITH THE CALLS FOR A DAY WITHOUT THE 99%, A GENERAL STRIKE AND MORE!! ON MAY DAY, WHEREVER YOU ARE, WE ARE CALLING FOR: NO WORK, NO SCHOOL, NO HOUSEWORK, NO SHOPPING, NO BANKING. TAKE THE STREETS!!!!!

After months of planning and preparation that yield thousands in the streets, a movement is not yet born. We realize unionized workers cannot break from the chains of their bosses and their leadership. So much has changed. Wages are stagnant, unions are busted, municipal austerity has set in; the exploitation of the worker increasingly overlaps with the experience of being in debt. We are all forced into servitude to Wall Street as we try to make ends meet. We articulate the indebted as a political subject.

DISCOVER THE
POWER OF
REFUSAL!
DEBT
WE ARE YOUR NEIGHBORS · WE ARE YOUR FAMILY · WE ARE YOUR FRIENDS
JOIN THE RESISTANCE
WE ARE THE 99% · OCCUPY WALL STREET · BRING YOUR FRIENDS
FINANCIAL DISTRICT · S17NYC.ORG · SEPT 15-17 2012 · STRIKEDEBT.ORG

TAMON ROBINSON
MURDERED BY NYPD
IN 2011, THE NYPD STOPPED & FRISKED MORE YOUNG BLACK MEN THAN THERE ARE YOUNG BLACK MEN IN NYC.
RAMARLEY GRAHAM
MURDERED BY NYPD
MORE THAN 1800 PEOPLE WILL BE STOPPED & FRISKED BY THE NYPD TODAY, AND TOMORROW, AND THE DAY AFTER THAT.
IN 2011, THE NYPD STOPPED & FRISKED MORE YOUNG BLACK MEN THAN THERE ARE YOUNG BLACK MEN IN NYC.
TAMON ROBINSON
MURDERED BY NYPD

Strike ~~Debt~~

We focus on debt and touch a nerve. The new American dream is to get out of debt. Education debt, medical debt, credit card debt, mortgage debt, payday loans. We meet people where they are at, where global finance touches our lives in the most immediate ways. We gather and tell stories. The feeling of strength in weakness. The power of refusal—can't pay, won't pay. The smell of the bills going up in smoke as we testify together. The images become actions and back again. We perform our shared reality to break the silence, the shame, and the isolation, and build community instead. We imagine debt as more than a set of "issues." We imagine debt as a placeholder for a dehumanizing system in its totality; debt as an amplifier of other oppressions; debt as a racist war machine; debt as a distillation of non-freedom. We imagine other debts and other bonds: to friends, family, community, rather than to the banks. Debts owed from immemorial histories of slavery and colonization. Debts that are both immeasurable and singular, debts that mark each of our lives and relations in different ways

...And Other Racist, Capitalist Bullshit

The identity of the debtor gains traction, but primarily among middle-class white people. We know that debt impacts poor communities of color the hardest, from subprime mortgages to payday loans, to urban austerity. Debt intersects with racialized state violence on an everyday basis. All roads lead to Wall Street, but they pass through the precinct, the prison, and the morgue. As we reimagine resistance to capitalism at an urban level, we think of those killed by the NYPD, private security

AMADOU DIALLO

SHANTEL DAVIS

SEAN BELL

OSCAR GRANT

MANUEL DIAZ

RAMARLEY GRAHAM

TRAYVON MARTIN

KIMANI GRAY

And so it goes...

Climate Strike

Climate strikes back against Wall Street, and we all get flooded. The banks are under water. The ocean in the streets, block by block. The boardwalk is in ruins. We convert churches into hubs for mutual aid. There is a void left by the State. We do not hesitate. We step in, we take the risk. It is a crisis and an opportunity. We are reminded that "our struggle against the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few is also a struggle for life—and that an obsession with growth and firing up a sputtering economy misses the larger ecological questions confronting the planet."

We offset the negligence of the city and the agencies so everything won't fall further apart. A grey area between emergency relief and political resistance; can we pivot in that space? Can we align our responsibility to act with what we are working toward? How do we link climate to debt, to work, to sustainable living?

We go to Detroit with these questions.

It Does Not Resemble a City

Detroit is a mythic wasteland of romantic ruins and vacant space. This post-industrial picturesque effaces those living and struggling in what used to be the city. Capital and the state have withdrawn from massive swathes of territory. Every square inch is a Wall Street crime scene. In both its devastation and possibility, Detroit is an outpost from our collective future. Long-term struggles on the ground throw everything into a new light:

our own cities, our own work, our own lives. Racial, economic, and environmental justice understood in a global context of empire, neo-liberalism, and climate disaster. People thinking of revolutionary time in decades and centuries, rather than in days and months. Non-monetary economies; community-based agriculture; work beyond jobs; education beyond school; culture beyond art; life beyond capitalism. In Detroit, we hear over and over: how do we live? ■

✧✧✧✧

Do you remember when they said
It was the end of history?

Do you remember when we couldn't imagine?

Do you remember when a borderless
world wasn't possible?

Do you remember when the crack
opened beneath our feet?

The liberated territories are coming.

FEMINIST ONLINE ACTIVISM
AS TEACHING/COMMUNITY/SPACE-MAKING

BY ALEXANDRA JUHASZ

FEMINIST ONLINE MEDIA MANTRAFESTO*

Access begs literacy
Literacy initiates production
Mass production fosters popularity.

Popularity produces virality
Virality forecloses context, shared interests
and vocabulary, and local community
Community is built upon safety.

Safety fosters the sharing of voice and responsibility
Shared responsibility is necessary for democracy
Democracy protects vulnerability.

Vulnerability forecloses visibility
Visibility demands a safe space
Safe spaces need rules and hierarchies.

Rules and hierarchies require transparency and process
Process is built upon equal voices
All voices want a body.

A body needs to be visible
Visibility allows for warranting
Warranting insures civility and positionality.

Positionality fosters political community
Political communities demand spaces,
both virtual and real
Spaces demand access

-ALEXANDRA JUHASZ
feel free to comment, nuance, or add your own mantra
* "Mantrafesto" suggested by Thomas Burkdall

This Mantrafesto sits on the front of my website, **FeminstOnlineSpaces.com**, greeting my readers (or writers). It plays out and with the significant themes that are learned, expressed, enacted and considered within the many digital objects produced for and on the site, and the offline interactions that inspire them.

I do not think about this work as militant, although I am happy for it to be labeled as such, because I do not think the militaristic, patriarchal, or even aggressive meanings of the term are best suited for the type of activism/research/teaching that occurs and is envisioned in its spaces.

If you take a look at the "Topics" listed on the side bar, you find the kinds of words that I prefer to frame politically engaged practices that are indebted to feminist analyses, organizing, and activism: community, democracy, interaction, performance, power, principles, safe-space...

Whatever the terms, to share this "militant research" here, I'd first want to emphasize a few things about the goals and findings of this online project, and perhaps some of what that evidences about online activism, in particular.

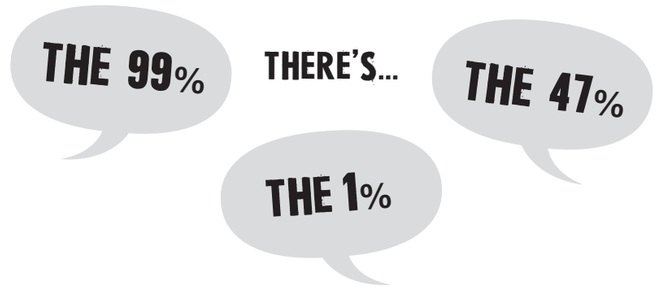
The site, which holds my own ruminations over many years about what might make a digital (or any space) "feminist" is also the home for an undergraduate course of the same name: thus it holds many objects made by many students over many years. My "research" here is pedagogy: one that aims to produce active, thoughtful, principled production and action. I also use the site to hold the many "little objects" that I ask audience members to make when I am speaking publicly about these same research interests. This exercise has many functions, all of which attempt to model in a room what are some of the best affordances of the Internet: interaction, deflating of authority and expertise, quick but thoughtful production in the name of shared goals and understanding. All this is to say that there is A LOT of stuff on the site, and very few people, if any, would want to wade into it as it now sits. Or to say: its most powerful function for research and activism may be in its feminist processes and expression, less than in its capacity as archive or even critical explication.

Finally, my "research" and teaching on the Internet—in the feminist spaces I build and interact in—have led me to believe that the writing and object-making that happens there, in the name of understanding and enacting feminist expression online, begs us to think past the digital, beyond representation, and back to bodies and lived spaces. This means two things: we need to continue to be critical of the Internet inside of the Internet, and we also need to leave it by linking (or editing or organizing) out to the world and other activists and actions and thereby into realms of behavior, interaction, and feeling that are neither commodifiable nor stuck. Activist digital activities need to create linked projects of secession. It is in the leaving that our feminist digital activism truly begins.

Activist digital research/teaching/organizing/writing must dare to fall outside of representation. This is not to say that the Internet is not a site for our feminist digital activism, but only when linked, not to another kitty, but to a place, a person, a demand, and an ethical practice of being together. ■

Alexandra Juhasz (right) at an Occupy LA protest. Image credit: www.feministonlinespaces.com.

WE HAVE A LOT TO SAY THESE DAYS ABOUT THE ECONOMY IN AMERICA.....

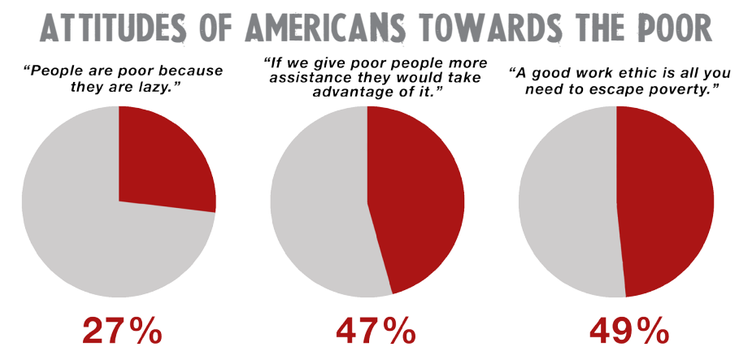


➜➜ BUT WHAT ABOUT THE 33%?

1 IN 3 PEOPLE LIVING IN THE U.S. ARE POOR. WHY AREN'T WE TALKING ABOUT POVERTY?

➜➜ STORIES ABOUT POVERTY DON'T SELL. AND PEOPLE FACING POVERTY HAVE LITTLE TIME AND RESOURCES TO TELL THEIR STORIES ON SOCIAL MEDIA.

THE PROBLEM WITH NO STORY IS THAT MANY PEOPLE GET THE WRONG STORY:


ATTITUDES OF AMERICANS TOWARDS THE POOR
"People are poor because they are lazy."
"If we give poor people more assistance they would take advantage of it."
"A good work ethic is all you need to escape poverty."
27%
47%
49%

Source: Perceptions of Poverty, The Salvation Army's Report to America (2012)Aa

WE NEED A MORE HONEST PICTURE OF WHO WE ARE AS A COUNTRY AND WHERE WE ARE HEADING.

LONG STORY SHORT CROWDSOURCES STORIES AND SOLUTIONS FROM HUNDREDS OF PEOPLE IN THE U.S. FIGHTING TO RISE INTO THE MIDDLE CLASS.

Drawing from an archive of hundreds of video diaries made by very low income California residents, Long Story Short tells a collective story of poverty in America, narrated, defined, and analyzed entirely from within, offering a fresh perspective on one of the most challenging social issues our country faces.

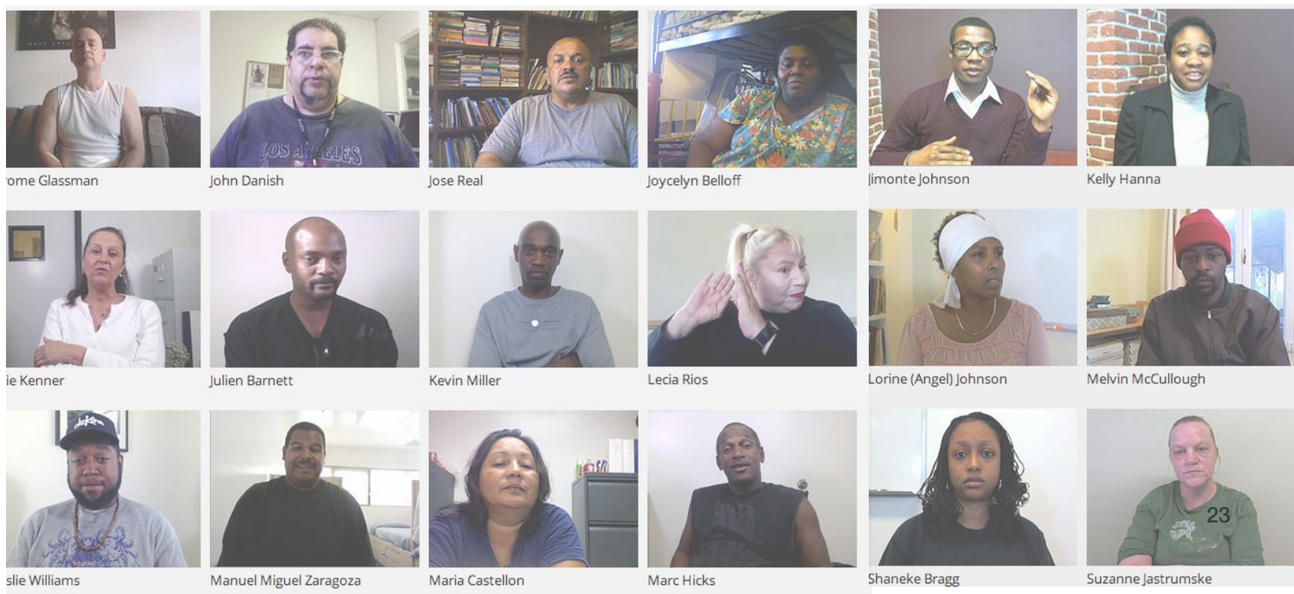
We live in an age of realtime public testimony, where many participate in building an ever-expanding digital archive containing our reflections, images, and opinions. But participation depends on access, and visibility depends on public affirmation. Most of Long Story Short's subjects have never before shared their views and stories in public, let alone on video. Yet this is a population that needs to be a part of our national dialogue.

Long Story Short compiles a missing inventory of video diaries in which people describe, reflect on, and analyze poverty's effects on their lives, families, and communities, as well as on their choices and opportunities. Its aim is to challenge pervasive misperceptions and stereotypes about who is in poverty and why, and to tell the story of economic struggle in America that is missing from the media and absent online.

Only this story is different: instead of a single narrator, there are hundreds, whose life stories are woven together to create a rich, composite narrative. Voices are layered, people speak in sync, and dozens of speakers appear simultaneously, suggest scale and multiplicity; for every narrator, there could be numerous others. Each individual offers a unique, partial perspective. Together, they form a complex collective voice, revealing links and connections, including repeated narrative tropes, turns of phrases, and life trajectories. Together, they depict many of poverty's narratives as deeply shared. The story is told by people not usually in the public eye–the homeless, former gang members, ex-cons, high school drop-outs, the long time unemployed, along with the new poor, those once in or on their way to the middle class.

The narrations–shot with webcams–are placed within a contemporary vernacular of social media. In an era of over-produced, digitally enhanced images, the work finds beauty and paradox in the digital DIY image with its clumsy imperfections and traces of the human. The casual set-up shortens our distance to speaker, who could be addressing us on Skype, on Facetime, on Facebook. Yet these are some of the same digital, high tech tools that helped usher in hardships for many low-skilled workers in the first place. Here these tools amplify the voices of those economically left behind.

Long Story Short is told from a perspective Americans don't often get to hear–explanations, understandings, and self-definitions of people in America struggling to rise into the middle class. Rich personalities, striking overlaps in multiple stories, and intimate narrations lure viewers in. ■



THE INTERRUPTION OF THE DOMINANT NARRATIVE

Amador Fernndez-Savater interviews colectivo Enmedio

“The interruption of the dominant narrative to create our own is the sort of politics we’re interested in.”

Frustrated by the lack of connection between art and political action, Campa, Leo, Mario y Oriana created, among others, the colectivo Enmedio (“InBetween collective”) (Barcelona) to explore the transformative potential of images and tales. They recently hacked the statue of Columbus in Barcelona and, amongst many other initiatives, they are also responsible for the striking visual campaign used by Spain’s anti-foreclosure movement, the PAH, to highlight and publicly shame corrupt politicians responsible for maintaining Spain’s draconian fore-closure laws. We talk to them about art’s power to politically intervene, both practically and potentially, in the crisis.

A SPACE IN BARCELONA, AN ART COLLECTIVE, AN ACTION GROUP, WHAT EXACTLY IS ENMEDIO?

Leo: The name says a lot about us. Enmedio is born of heartbreak. We’re all image professionals (designers, filmmakers, artists, etc.) who’ve left our usual work behind. We found no meaning in the spaces we were assigned: the art academy, the advertising agency, the production company. So we got out of that and came up with a new space where can do what we want, a bit of an uncomfortable and difficult space in a no-man’s-land.

Campa: There’s no politics in the established spaces for art (though there’s no lack of politicking!) nor will you find a whole lot of concern about aesthetics in political spaces. This is what pushed us to create a third space, to be in-between art and politics.

Mario: Visual work can be very powerful and that’s some-thing that we want to keep exploring. It’s our thing, it’s what we do best and the way we relate to the world. But we need to take that to other places and mix it up with other things. Enmedio makes reference to that unknown space we want to occupy, that has something to do with photography or video, but it isn’t just that, although it has that too, I don’t know if I’ve made myself clear?

Oriana: We’ve been exploring this edge for some ten or twelve years. Some of us come from collectives like Las Agencias, Yomango, V de Vivienda, etc. There are people who’ve been involved in squats, or the anti-globalization protests, or Latin American movements, like Zapatismo, and people with no political history, or otherwise informed by today’s movements: V de Vivienda, 15-M, etc. This mix of different creative and political backgrounds breaks our individual roles when working together and produces some surprising effects; that may be our strongest suit.

DOES SYMBOLIC POLITICAL INTERVENTION MAKE A DIFFERENCE DURING A CRISIS LIKE THIS, WHICH TOUCHES AND AFFECTS THE MOST MATERIAL AND REAL SIDES OF OUR LIVES (HOUSING, SALARIES, ETC.)?

Campa: Capitalism drives us to this sort of misery, to these foreclosures and this suffering, through images and tales. It’s a master storyteller with an impressive capacity to fascinate. Lots of people got mortgaged because they bought the story, built on words and images, that we got from banks and advertising on a daily basis. Advertising creates images of desirable worlds, and that collective image generates economic paradigms and social situations.

Leo: It’s not like on the one hand we have this fiction, and on the other, reality. Fiction is the hard nucleus of reality. From a protest (an act of street-theatre) to the writing of a politi-cal speech (which deals with images and popular imagery), it’s all fiction. What’s important is the effect of these fictions, whether we can re-appropriate them or not, whether we believe in them or not, whether they generate confidence or impotence in ourselves. The basis for social change is cul-tural: the stories through which we make sense of our lives and the world we live in.

Mario. That’s the reason why we work in two directions. First, to interfere with the dominant narrative, the official explanation for the world, through guerrilla communication, with signs, catchphrases, messages, etc. Second, contrib-uting to the production of an autonomous imagery. Not as much breaking down a narrative as bringing in a new one. This is what’s most important and most difficult: to repre-sent ourselves, create our own story, our own explanation of what’s happening. A narrative we can inhabit.

LET’S EXPLORE ALL THIS IN MORE DETAIL, BY WAY OF YOUR OWN ACTIONS. IF YOU WANT, WE CAN START WITH THE PARTY AT THE UNEMPLOYMENT AGENCY INEM[1] THAT YOU ORGANIZED IN 2009.

WHAT BETTER SOLUTION TO FEAR THAN THROWING A PARTY?

Image by Enmedio member taking part in the Paro Monumental (Monumental Unemployment) Action. The text on the balloon reads: “Spain world champions of unemployment.”

Oriana: Maybe the most interesting thing was the moment: the crisis erupts, but there’s no reaction in the street. There’s fear and paralysis. Our idea was to find a place that con-densed and represented that fear. We chose the unemploy-ment office, and what better solution to fear than throwing a party?

Campa: Enmedio functions through self-representation. What I mean is, it wasn’t a party for the unemployed. We’re also unemployed, we live precariously, etc. We’re not lectur-ing anybody. We start by looking at ourselves, and then we invite everyone else to join. In the video you can see people smiling, participating, cheering or telling us “you’ve cheered up my day.” We look for that empathy by starting with our own worries, problems and woes.

Leo: That video got an amazing amount of views. I think we touched on something that vibed with a shared feeling: if you start with what’s bothering you personally, you can commu-nicate it to others. What’s most intimate is, at the same time, most common.

Mario: We want our actions to be inspiring and contagious. We plan and design them as seeds that can take root elsewhere. Once the 15-M movement got started, we saw parties thrown at an INEM office in the Canary Islands, and other similar actions.

TELL US ABOUT THE REFLECTORS.

Leo: The Reflectantes (Reflectors) is an action group that sprang from a series of creative activism workshops we called “Como acabar con el Mal” (How to end Evil) where we tried to pass on creative activism experiences and practices to younger people who got into politics after 15-M and what-not. It’s linked to a long tradition of character creation which acts in protest spaces, from Prît a Revolter to the New Kids on the Black Block, proposing new ways of taking to the street, filled with joy, colour and creativity.

Mario: The Reflectors have a lot to do with the moment they came out, around the first anniversary of 15-M. The powers that be had, by then, gone full thrust with acts of repression and criminalization, in order to end street protest. Bringing in that kind of dynamic leeches the natural plurality from the street, “de-democritizing” protest until only small and very homogenous groups remain, easily identified and codified. That’s where the Reflectors come in, saying, “We’re not gonna play this game, let’s break the rules.”

Campa: The Reflectors play with the imagery of superheroes and fan culture. They’re normal people, but armed with a set of tools which allows them to combat Evil: inflatable cubes to deflect the police if they decide to charge, mirrors to blind surveillance ‘copters, disguises to break the codifica-tion, etc. They both dramatize and de-dramatize protest by using humour and generating new feelings, making street presence desirable again, while, at the same time, putting elements into play that help to channel moments of tension and violence.

Oriana: A lot of people joined the Reflective Block on the 15-M anniversary march. We also met people we

Celebrating the closing of a Bankia account in Barcelona.
Image credit: Jueves Enmedio.

be throwing a party (as you can see, we just love to throw parties).

Campa: So, one day, a group of people went to a Bankia office, and patiently crouched and waited for a client to close her account. Then we went in and threw a party for her. She couldn't believe it. We were in there for four minutes at the most, that's how long the song lasted. We lifted her up and carried her out over our heads, and got out of there the same way we came in. We then cut a video out of all this and it got more than 100,000 visits in 24 hours and hasn't stopped since. The YouTube page is full of comments. The video was shown on various TV channels, and other ìCierra Bankiaî parties took place in cities all across Spain.

Oriana: The idea was to show that something as intimate and private as your bank account can be used as a political statement; that closing an account can be a public act, and, above all, a lot of fun!

WHAT WAS THE DISCONGRESO (DE-CONGRESS)?

Mario: Enmedio joined the 25-S campaign: "Ocupa el congreso"(Occupy Congress). It was a call to action that coincided with our own internal debates: We felt that 15-M had fallen into some repetitive inertias and that 25-S could be a good occasion to break out of them. The problem was that it was a very insular call to action, both exclusive and codified. Our work there was to use communication as a way of opening it up. WIth the posters, a graphic campaign and a proposal to occupy the space in a different way, we wanted to come up with a different story, reappropriate the event, and make it both open and desirable.

Oriana: Design-wise, it was a very simple campaign. We replaced "Occupy Congress" for "Surround Congress," because for us it was never about taking power but a removal of power. Then we added. "On 25-S we'll surround Congress until they resign. Period." In the poster we had a series of different coloured dots, representing a plural society, surrounding a centre.

Campa: Those dots actually become pictures later on. We put out a photo call inviting people to take pics showing their own reasons for going to an event like 25-S. We took the photo call out to the street, and we put the word out on social media so people could take their own pics and add their reasons. We wanted to highlight diversity and open up an event that, at first, had felt very exclusive.

Leo: And finally, the dots were turned into frisbees on which people wrote their demands. We then sent these on to Congress, flying over police barricades during the actual protest on September 25th. Since, by land, there was no way to get into Congress so they'd listen to us, the only option we had was by air!

TELL ME ABOUT THE "WE ARE NOT NUMBERS" ACTION PHOTOGRAPHY WORKSHOP.

Oriana: Working with photographs and, in collaboration with PAH, we wanted to reverse the dehumanized and victim-like portrayals of people affected by foreclosure that the media puts out. We portrayed people about to be foreclosed, or who had already been kicked out, and we pasted those portraits, all blown up, on the banks that had led to their situations, showing that the foreclosed have faces and eyes, that they're not just statistics. And from those pictures, we've also designed a series of postcards where we tell these people's stories. These were directed, first of all, to the banks, and later (during the escraches), to politicians.

Campa: These photographic interventions work in two ways. On the one hand, they empower the affected. They come to the workshop, they pose, see their photographs, then they're pasted up on the banks, and like this we break the wall of shame, they create a presence in public space. On the other, it's guerrilla imagery in the struggle between different depictions of the crisis, the day-to-day battle held on the walls of the cites, associating a face with the organization responsible for the foreclosure (foreclosures are often talked about in the media, but they never mention the names of the banks). The interruption of the dominant narrative to create our own is the sort of politics we're interested in.

Leo: For us, the real key isn't the quality of the portraits or videos, but their coordination with social processes as powerful as PAH. But we're also quite careful and exacting about form. We don't share the sloppiness of those that think that the content of the picture or poster is the only worthwhile thing. We're concerned about aesthetics, not out a love for aestheticism itself, but because of the very politics of aesthetics: the "how" of relating these things, the "what" we're given to see, the "what" we're led to feel. Lacking form, there's only naked rage and no communication.

YOU'VE ALSO DESIGNED THE POPULAR RED AND GREEN SIGNS USED BY THE PAH IN THEIR ESCRACHES[3]. A FRIEND, AFTER BEING IN A ESCRACHE, TOLD ME "THOSE SIMPLE SIGNS ARE SO IMPORTANT; WITHOUT THEM WE'D JUST SEEM TO BE A FURIOUS MASS, AND LITTLE ELSE"

Leo: The problem with housing has always been central to us. Some of us took part in the graphic commission of V de Vivienda-Barcelona[4], where we came up with the famous slogan: "You'll never own a house in your whole fucking life." So, during the "No somos numeros" (We're not numbers) workshop we formed a direct relationship with the PAH, and they asked us to take care of the visual side of the escraches. It was a very important proposal for us and, at the same time, a very delicate one.

Mario: The idea was to lay out the conflict with a very simple visual statement. On one side we have the "Yes we can" from the PAH (the million signatures, the social support, etc). On the other side, the "But they don't want to," coming from the political elite, totally deaf to society. Green and red: walk and stop. A lot of green signs against a lone red one: 99% and 1%. The signs and stickers weren't so much designed to point to any specific politicians but, more than anything, to gather and serve the outpouring of social support the PAH has had.

Oriana: In the original Argentinian escraches, the neighborhood played a crucial role. In this case, it was very much the same idea. being able to surround your representative with green buttons on your own neighborhood. That shopkeepers (the baker, the hardware guy, the newspaper vendor) could put the sticker up on their shops. In other words, so that the whole neighborhood would be denouncing the representative, inviting him or her to push the green button. The important thing about the escraches is to pile on people, people from the neighborhood, people who walk by, so that anyone can be part of the "green tide" as represented by the PAH. That's the effect we wanted to have with the signs.

Campa: Again, the production side of this has been very important, how you put this to work. The materials are simple and cheap, the design is up for grabs in PAH's website, so anyone with a printer, some paper and a bit of cello-tape can go and make their own signs. We're just as concerned with the concept (the "what") as with the production (the "how").

HOW ABOUT WRAPPING UP BY GOING THROUGH SOME OF THE MAIN INFLUENCES OR REFERENCE POINTS FOR YOUR WORK, BETWEEN IMAGES AND SOCIAL CONCERNS, BETWEEN ART AND POLITICS?

Oriana: Zapatismo, due to having lived though it myself and because of its meaning. To come from the frivolity and disenchantment of the 90s, to suddenly finding a new way of doing politics and communication. The importance of words and symbols, in the harshest living conditions. Working within and working from the true imagination of the people you work with and the people you want to reach. How central processes, not just results, are.

Mario: Pop music. I see my work as being very related to that, pop culture, what's popular. This desire to get in touch with the whole of society, the will to push emotions and desires, the yearning to come up with juicy representations where you see yourself reflected, wherever you want to participate, so you can get moving...

Leo: The Yippies, a group created and active in the midst of 60s American counterculture, whose aim was to politically radicalize the hippie movement. Yippies understood social change as a struggle between symbols, and flexed most of their activist muscle creating myths, rumours and fictions to short circuit the dominant narrative, and to put in circulation autonomous images. Coming from a very different context, I pretty much think the same way.

Campa: Regarding what I'm concerned with, and given that Zapatismo has already been mentioned, I'd say punk. Not so much in a musical or aesthetic sense, but having to do with sheer attitude, that nerve, freshness, immediacy, nonconformity, DIY culture, the intensity of a 3-minute song. I think that ties in rather well with what we do at Enmedio. ■

Translated by Stacco Troncoso, edited by Jane Loes Lipton -Guerrilla Translation!

FOOTNOTES:

[1] INEM: Instituto Nacional de Empleo is Spain's National Institute for Employment: Administrative body coming under the Ministry of Labour, set up in 1978 to develop and follow up employment policy, to coordinate and run public employment offices and to administer the unemployment benefit system.

[2] Bankia is Spain's own big-bank-bailout debacle, going from public bank to private entity, subsequently bankrupting itself and then controversially being rescued with public funds, concurrent with the imposition of austerity measures.

[3] Escrache*, an Argentinian term, describes a mode of protest wherein people go take their concerns directly to their representative's homes and neighborhoods to condemn and publicly humiliate decision makers on their unethical choices.*

[4] Or "H is for Housing" a wordplay on V for Vendetta.

FIRST NOTE: ON SOLIDARITY

By Suzahn Ebrahimian

النصر للشعوب التي تقاتل في سبيل التحرير!
VICTORY WILL BE ATTAINED BY THE PEOPLES WHO STRUGGLE FOR THEIR LIBERATION !
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Let me be clear: I want to complicate everything.

I came to the first day of demonstrations on Wall Street on September 17th. I occupied and organized with that same nebulous group until May Day, 2012. I do not consider myself an occupier, part of a singular movement, global uprising, or any other totalizing label that gets thrown around when discussing what happened on and after September 17, 2011. So why not?

The history of OWS is characterized by tireless efforts of unification—and equally tireless efforts against imposed unity. The first manifestation of this conflict came to us in the form of the "one demand." A singular voice—a singular identity—was our duty to the 1%. The rules of the game insist that we must give our opponent someone to fight against; for just as the idea of the 1% has essentialized the idea of oppression, so must we essentialize ourselves in order to fight against our constructed enemy. Internal and external (those categories barely hold up here) forces demanded to give "the public" a platform to stand and fight from. Queue: "We. Are. The 99%!"

Several attempts have been made to create a through-line from which one may track a singular genealogy of OWS. It is not useful to say that these efforts of unification have fallen short. A more apt assessment would be that they fall right into the hands of history. Many have taken issue with the failure to unify a national or global struggle as a monumental failure of the "movement." I don't see it like this. And this is where it gets complicated.

Containment, categorization, assigning subjectivity and identity, ignoring complexities and intersections; these are the products of linear histories, binary constructions, simple dichotomies, and unified pluralities. In other words, our oppressors use simple boxes of identity to contain and destroy our potential—so how is recreating this containment supposed to be liberating?

I want to understand how we look at global movement, how we objectify ourselves, and how this objectification reinforces our own oppression. The last article I wrote for Tidal was directly speaking to this. It was my final exasperated plea: who are we? Tip: if you can answer that in a three or four word chant, or a one word label for a movement, the battle for liberation has been lost.

Now, of course, I am not saying that we should all remove ourselves from a globalized context. Finance capital, neoliberal economics, these are global, border destroying beasts. So how to demonstrate global resonance? Or, to use the vocabulary of resistance, how do we show our solidarity?

Let's keep in mind, unity and solidarity are not the same. Solidarity does not mean co-option, nor taking on another's cause as a reflection of some constructed moral code. It doesn't mean that every person around the globe adopts the same causes, same slogans, same tactics as international signifiers of "authentic" revolution. That is not liberation, that is branding.

Solidarity does not seek to distill and unify global resonances within a singular global cause. For just as sure as an American occupier feels that they are in solidarity with Tahrir Square, they know little of the US history of intervention in the Middle East, and inherently perpetuate U.S. supremacy through their insistence on "one global movement" with the same goals.

There are global connections to be made, of course. But fostering an understanding through discussions on how to materially or otherwise support those in Tahrir—to practice solidarity—was virtually non-existent in the OWS I experienced. Yet somehow, a unity of revolutionary spirit has been projected out of and onto OWS.

The question of solidarity becomes an imperative when, as is happening now, resistance becomes immediate and urgent. In Turkey, a small protest in Gezi park, organized to save some of the last remaining green spaces, has become an uncontainable rupture. The situation there, both energizing and heartbreaking, has captured global attention. As I read descriptions from those on the ground in Istanbul, I thought about solidarity efforts in New York.

Occupy Wall Street has amassed an unthinkable amount of social capital, which, like any other privilege, should be navigated responsibly. There are calls for re-occupation in solidarity with Gezi park. While occupation (or re-occupation) of public space in itself isnít necessarily bad practice in solidarity, it does carry a focus-shifting element that might do more harm than good. So how can one powerful group illuminate a connected struggle without "stealing the spotlight" (so to speak)?

Our global connections do not mean that anything we do will inherently benefit our comrades in other countries. Strategy is necessary, as well as careful consideration of ones position in the system being fought. Those living in the heart of a colonizing neoliberal empire have a certain responsibility of solidarity that goes far beyond the symbolic.

For example, one of Turkey's main suppliers of tear gas is the USA. In fact, three U.S. companies make up the largest exporters of tear gas globally. To stop the exports of tear gas would be to slow the tactically repressive abilities of government forces in Turkey, Egypt, Israel, and many other countries. One of these firms, Combined Systems, has an office in Manhattan. Nonlethal Technologies (based out of Homer, PA) brand tear gas is being fired by police in Turkey as I type.

Sharing this information isn't to tell anyone what to do or how to live out their solidarity. Sometimes, solidarity means step back. Other times, it means attack. Of course, blockading a shipment of tear gas isnít the key to complete global liberation. But it is a real, tangible show of solidarity that highlight the real connections of our resistance.

Real support comes in many different forms, and global connections—constructed by and for financial interests—can be used to shut the system down. Creative tactical choices that use our location within the complex systems at play were rarely discussed at the OWS I experienced.

The mission isnít so much to build connections, but to illuminate the existing connections and use them consciously.

Back to my initial thoughts. "Who are we?" is a pressing question that starts us on the path to collective liberation. The answer, of course, must begin with "Who (and where) am I?"—and these questions must never be answered. It is the questioning that liberates. We must hold ourselves accountable to all that makes us, and all that we desire to make real. Liberation is a synthesis of generative destruction, and this is no simple task.

Let me rephrase: I want uncontainable, undefinable liberation. I want to work out just what struggle, accountability, and solidarity can look like. I want to explore the limits of self-care.

I want to complicate myself together with you. ■

TRACING THE CONTOURS OF THE MOVEMENT

By Pamela Brown

What is it that we mean when we say “the movement”? Sometimes it seems that what we have come to call “the movement” has so many meanings that it has almost none. The movement is everything that came out of the park, and also everything on the left that organizes in one way or another against neoliberal capitalism. And while there are overlaps, there are also important tensions.

As we continue to connect the dots and build alliances between Occupy and traditional left organizing nationally, it may be worth considering what it is we really mean when we say “the movement.” Where are its outlines and intersections? But also, where are the gaps and incompatibilities?

Recently, Ear to the Ground Project published a report, *More Than We Imagined: Activists Assessment of the Moment and the Way Forward*. The report is based on 150 interviews with movement activists. It is chock full of helpful insights into how a broad array of organizers feel about the current state of left organizing. Important points are made about the language of anticapitalism and political identity, as well as about the need for grassroots base building and the desire for coherence. The report notes that 50% of participants found that the movement was fragmented and were confused as to why attempts at cohesion have failed.

The authors define “movement” broadly: “the sustained activism of various organizations and individuals toward a common goal of political, economic, cultural or social change.” And they also reference the concept of a “movement of movements,” defining it as the kind of movement that brings together “movements, organizations, activists from different issues, sectors and communities into a shared struggle against the intersecting systems that produce injustice and inequality.”

But even these definitions make biases and tensions between NGOs that use traditional organizing models and Occupy palpable. Not all of the basic assumptions over the need for coherence, the solidity of the boundaries of the nation-state, the operation of power and resistance in neoliberal capitalism, and the distinctions between political and social change seem fully shared. There is overlap, but also dissonance.

Occupy has ebbed and flowed, taken on a wide range of political and social issues, emerged through local and global struggles, and popped up in beautiful, but difficult to pinpoint, rhizomatic forms in which the roots are not visible, yet are nevertheless interconnected deep beneath the surface. In some ways Occupy has become a brand associated with specific identities, but more than anything else it is a way of being, and an aspirational community connected as a global network that understands itself as seeking a world beyond capitalist social relations—as unknowable and uncertain of a future as that is. Because Occupy is not so much a thing but a way, it can shift in ways that are frustratingly hard to grasp.

Frequently, tensions have been voiced as a demand to get over “no demands” and an insistence on bringing structure to the “lack of structure.” The answer that “we are the demands” or that “we are organized around human bonds” has proven unsatisfying for many with traditional leanings toward the political. And of course, the idea that Occupy has not really been a “political” movement has been troubling for those who do not connect the end of capitalism with the end of politics—at least as we have known the political thus far.

Struggling to figure out new social relationships that rely on forms of democracy that cannot be limited, controlled and managed by the state can seem elusive and like pie-in-the-sky. What are they accomplishing? How are they working? Who’s in charge? Experimenting with prefiguring new ways to live has led to both moments of profound love and interconnectedness, but also revelations about how deeply imprinted neoliberalism is on our behaviors, intuitive understandings and sensibilities. The gaps generate the ìmovement of movementsî that we see and experience today—something perceived as fragmented, when we look for and cannot find the forms of solidarity we have seen in the past.

But as Suzahn Ebrahimian points out in “First Note: On Solidarity” (also in this Handbook)

> Solidarity does not mean co-option, nor taking on anotherís cause as a reflection of some constructed moral code. It doesn’t mean that every person around the globe adopts the same causes, same slogans, same tactics as international signifiers of ìauthenticî revolution. That is not liberation, that is branding.
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> Solidarity does not seek to distill and unify global resonances within a singular global cause. For just as sure as an American occupier feels that they are in solidarity with Tahrir Square, they know little of the US history of intervention in the Middle East, and inherently perpetuate U.S. supremacy through their insistence on “one global movement” with the same goals.

There is no reason for us to be attached to the forms of solidarity of the past. Power has changed, morphed and become imprinted on our bodies and ways of being, and does not manage us in the same ways as in the past—though it still constrains. Many identities are expressed publicly in ways that were limited in the past.

Solidarity is a feeling and cannot be forced—it is affective, and also liminal. Its liminal qualities flow across space and time in unexpected ways, as we refuse to be identified as a body that can be managed and moved in the old ways. We feel ourselves in solidarity with Occupy Gezi. They understand that while their political local struggle is distinct, our social struggle is united. We need to build on these emerging forms of solidarity and also challenge the ways that neoliberalism has divided us affectively, making it difficult to feel unified.

The age of print capitalism has already ended. Our “imagined communities” have shifted beyond the nation-state. Power now flows over networks, and coalesces in nodes. Solidarity also flows. As a result state boundaries may not hold in rigid and expected ways. Communication is complex, dynamic and often invisible. The boundaries of the state are being challenged, as bodies refuse to be bound by arbitrary borders, and demand to be bound by love. What it means to be human has grown beyond current walls and lines.

We have witnessed the unthinkable before—the sudden collapse of great powers, when tensions bubble up and affects become unmanageable by the state, forming solidarities that are beyond language ñ expanding, superseding—pushing in instinctive ways.

The threat to humanity is far greater than ever before as we face a potentially evolutionary moment as our cognition becomes colonized by capitalism through a process of industrializing our memory such that our reference points are dominated by capitalismís ideologies. It is our social relations that hold the current order in place. In order to change them, we have to refuse. Like the park, we have to write a new story without falling into the old patterns ñ we have to break the rules of the genre, yet our actions must resonate. To do this we have to keep trying, keep writing, and telling and finding spaces where we are able to struggle to share.

When we come together, find each other in a square, we strike a critical blow by collectively creating new relations. This requires enormous effort and we often fail, because of those invisible blind spots that demand that we rely on old ideas and repeat the narrative that has been set out. We cannot assume that a global movement or even its national elements should be coherent as seeking similar goals; we cannot afford to believe that there are effective forms of resistance that fail to subvert old paradigms.

Yes, most of the time we are failing, but it’s not because we are not trying. The social system is as powerful as the air we breathe. We cannot think our way out. We have to think and do and create and refuse and think again and start all over again without stopping the flow.

But because our game plays out over the present forms of privilege, horizontal does not necessitate democracy—democracy requires an equitable distribution of power. There is no such thing as radical democracy where voices are excluded or marginalized. When the privilege to occupy a square comes without widely shared analysis of how to rectify structural inequalities, we fail to create new forms of solidarity and fail to cross the lines capitalism has drawn. What ways are there to protect the minority— even one that does not have the privilege to participate ñ from a tyranny of the majority? Have we collectively begun to think about what democracy really means in practice?

This tension exists in the demand for demands and the anger that circulates around Occupyís structure as unintentional. Who has the privilege not to demand? Who has the privilege not to desire the protection of some state? As we trace the contours of the movement, we will need to start to trace these lines too. By turning a blind eye to the ways structural inequalities are affective and work liminally as shared sensibilities, we can only build a sociality that is as false, commodified, and exploitative as the one we have today. But just by looking at structures of oppression does not mean that democracy results. To do this we will need to share across the gaps, work through the tensions, practice radical compassion, and set aside attachments to a past narrative of what ìthe movementî means. ■

WE HAVE TO WRITE A NEW STORY WITHOUT FALLING INTO THE OLD PATTERNS.

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MEDIA, CULTURE, AND COMMUNICATION